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# Lenart Škof & Petri Berndtson, (eds.), "Atmospheres of Breathing."

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**Lenart Škof & Petri Berndtson, eds.** *Atmospheres of Breathing*. SUNY Press 2018. 326 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781438469737); \$27.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781438469744).

*Atmospheres of Breathing* is a collection of essays that takes up, from various perspectives, philosophical issues surrounding respiration, breath, air, embodied ontology, and more besides. The collection features 17 essays and a useful introduction (versions of five of the essays have been previously published). In my estimation, not all of the essays are successful, but *most* of them are—and even those that are not entirely successful still provide ample food for thought. The collection itself is utterly unique, and is sure to reveal to those new to ‘respiratory ontology’ and ‘breath-full philosophy’ (most of us, I would assume) a great many new and interesting philosophical issues.

If one has never considered the role of breathing in philosophy and religion, the first thing that one will notice is how pervasive claims about breath turn out to be. Those familiar with the meditative traditions of Asia (like yoga, vipassana bhavana, and zazen, for example) will of course recognize that the breath (and breathing) play a crucial role in these traditions: the breath acts as an anchor while one cultivates insight; it reflects one’s being-in-the-world; it reveals what Buddhism calls the ‘three marks of existence’ (non-satisfactoriness, impermanence, and no-self (Pali: dukkha, anicca, anatta)). The breath itself models emptiness (Sanskrit: sunyata): upon inspection, the breath is always changing, its content is empty of all substance, without an inherent nature.

The place of the breath in meditative practices (Buddhist and otherwise) is well known. What is less well-known is the fact that many different traditions (religious as well as philosophical) also assign a crucial place to the breath and to air—as do several of the giants of Western philosophy (including some of the Pre-Socratics, William James, Merleau-Ponty, and Luce Irigaray, to name but a few). The essays in *Atmospheres of Breathing* trace the different yet overlapping use of breath (and air) across these traditions and philosophers, revealing how the use and elaboration of breath and air are anything but incidental to them. In this respect, the book serves as an excellent resource in comparative philosophy: the insights of meditative practice seem to show up, albeit in shadowy form, in a wide variety of thinkers and texts (including the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament).

One difficulty in a collection like *Atmospheres of Breathing* stems from its eclectic nature: it is likely not possible for any single reader to have mastered all (or even most) of the philosophical and religious traditions discussed. Learning the languages of these divergent traditions alone would be the task of a lifetime (Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, German, French, ancient Greek, Hebrew, English, and more). Most will not feel competent enough to offer critical remarks on all of the essays in the text. Even given familiarity with several of the relevant languages and many of the philosophical traditions, one might find some of the contributions far removed from what one (thinks one) can engage profitably. In my own case, Kevin Hart’s essay on Mark Strand (‘Thoughts, that Breathe’) left me wondering if I was too unfamiliar with literary criticism on Strand’s work (or too committed to a more straightforwardly philosophical approach to the issues) to profit from an obviously competent work of scholarship. In this respect, it seems likely that the collection will offer different things for different people. This is not a criticism of the book, but a recognition of its collaborative and cross-disciplinary nature.

I do not want to suggest that one needs to be an *expert* on the domains covered to find the collection exciting and thought provoking. Indeed, there is so much fertile thinking in the volume that it would be difficult *not* to profit from it. Petri Berndtson’s essay (my favorite in the collection) sets out a systematic case for a new respiratory ontology that is as exciting as it is novel. It collects the use of breath and air from Christian texts, Zen Buddhism, Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology, and

ancient Greek thinking in a way that is both surprising and convincing. The use of breath as a model for being—one that displaces the idea of being as a kind of substance—resonates with both meditative approaches (like Zazen) and a phenomenology of embodiment (like the one found in Merleau-Ponty). James Morley's similar use of Merleau-Ponty to flesh out (pun intended) yogic practices is likewise extremely suggestive. Contributions by Drew Leder and David Abram are beautifully written (something I have come to expect from these two important philosophers) and show the relevance of breath to more practical domains: Leder takes up the issue of the role of breath in disease and healing; Abram considers the role breath might play in re-conceiving our eco-politics.

I have not engaged with the content of many of the essays in *Atmospheres of Breathing* largely because of the vast terrain they cover. This is not a text where one can easily isolate arguments and assess their validity and soundness. It is, rather, a suggestive and speculative array of analyses that aim to inspire (a term involving a breathing metaphor!) further work on the topic. The collection—unique and important—is well worth the time of the reader, regardless of the disciplinary or philosophical community she calls home.

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